

Cuba in the time of coronavirus: exploiting a global crisis

Part I: Pandemic as opportunity

April 7, 2020

If any country was ready for the global pandemic, it was Cuba ... but not how one would expect. Its regime has responded to the coronavirus crisis by kicking into high gear to reap economic and political gain while attempting to enhance its international image, blame the United States for its problems, and erode its economic sanctions. This time, however, its usual trade-off of repressing its people for external gain is looking like a riskier gamble.



Photo: CubaDebate.com

In early to mid-March 2020, as most countries took increasingly drastic measures to contain the spread of coronavirus, the Cuban government was striking deals to hire out its indentured doctors, hype its questionable medications, and lure tourists while ignoring the cost to its own population. Its huge state apparatus instantly deployed its arsenal of asymmetrical weapons —intelligence and propaganda— that are the hallmark of its unique brand of soft power.¹ It has proven quite effective to “alter the behavior of others to get what it wants”² in the world stage and it has an uncanny ability to use its people as political and economic weapons.

Although the 61-year old Communist regime rules over a repressed and impoverished people and a tiny, bankrupt economy, it has carefully crafted a fake narrative of Cuba as a “medical powerhouse” and “the world’s

¹ Joseph Nye, a political scientist and former Clinton administration official, coined the post-Cold War concept of “soft power in a 1990 Foreign Policy piece. He proposed that beyond using military power “to get others to do what they otherwise would not,” the United States could draw on its soft power —its noncoercive power— to cement its leadership position in the world through cultural, ideological, and institutional mechanisms.” (Joseph S. Nye Jr., “Think again: soft power,” *Foreign Policy*, February 23, 2006.)

² Eric X. Li, “The rise and fall of soft power,” *Foreign Policy*, August 20, 2018.

leading humanitarian”³ victimized by the United States. It unleashed a multiprong strategy centered on extolling these themes and on cue, its large network of international propagandists and influencers began disseminating a plethora of reports in many languages echoed in newspapers, TV reports, blogs, and social media around the world.

Cuba staged a public relations’ coup on March 16th by allowing most of the 682 passengers and 360 crew of the British cruise ship *MS Braemar* to disembark at the port of Mariel, be transferred in chartered buses to the international airport in Havana 25 miles away and flown out immediately to the U.K. The ship had been sailing the Caribbean in circles for a week —turned down by several countries including Commonwealth members Barbados and Bahamas— after several passengers tested positive for coronavirus. Cuba’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs launched a worldwide lovefest with statements such as this: “These are times for solidarity, for understanding health as a human right, and for strengthening international cooperation to face our common challenges; these values are key to the humanistic practices of the Revolution and of our people.”⁴ As the ship docked in Cuba, U.S. academic and Cuba expert Peter Kornbluh wrote for *The Nation* a piece titled “Cuba’s Welcome to a COVID-19-Stricken Cruise Ship Reflects a Long Pattern of Global Humanitarian Commitment”: “Cuban citizens reinforced that message by transmitting, via Facebook, best wishes to passengers on board the Braemar. “I am sitting in my cabin responding to every Cuban who has suddenly sent me uplifting, welcoming messages of support. I am quite honestly in floods of tears at their kindness,” one cruiser, Anthea Guthrie, posted on her Facebook page. They have made us not only feel tolerated, but actually welcome.”⁵

Kornbluh failed to mention that Cuba has armies of trolls dedicated to online propaganda who most likely received orders to target the appreciative passengers.⁶ As longtime Director of the Cuba and Chile Documentation Projects at the Washington, DC-based *National Security Archive*,⁷ he has devoted his long career to defending the Cuban dictatorship. In an interview for *Democracy Now* in which he called Cuba’s efforts “awesome”, he delivered all the hot talking points: 1. Cuba, a leader in global humanitarianism, for sending its doctors to help with the coronavirus crisis, especially in Italy, and taking in a cruise ship with virus-infected passengers; 2. peddling a drug (interferon) produced by Cuba as a very effective treatment for coronavirus; and 3. portraying Cuba as a victim of U.S. sanctions and calling to erode them.

The story on the *MS Braemar* circled the globe with customary lauds but failed to mention the over \$4 million that Cuba was paid to allow the ship to dock and for two charter planes to land and take off for the U.K. with the passengers.⁸ An “investigative” digital newspaper titled its piece “Even the United Kingdom,

³ See, for example, Beatriz Díez, “¿Cómo se convirtió Cuba en una potencia humanitaria?,” *BBC Mundo*, Sept. 22, 2014; and Ben Norton, “Italy and UK rely on help from Cuba, China, Venezuela to fight coronavirus – as US steps up brutal sanctions,” *The Grayzone*, Mar. 17, 2020.

⁴ “Cuba will accept and assist travelers on British cruise ship MS Braemar,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs Statement, *Granma*, Mar. 16, 2020. (Translated from Spanish.) Also see for the MS Braemar story: Sarah Marsh and Nelson Acosta, “Passengers of British coronavirus-hit cruise ship evacuate in Cuba,” Havana, *Reuters*, Mar. 18, 2020; Francesca Street, “Virus-hit cruise ship MS Braemar docks in Cuba after Caribbean odyssey,” *CNN*, Mar. 18, 2020.

⁵ Peter Kornbluh, “Cuba’s Welcome to a COVID-19-Stricken Cruise Ship Reflects a Long Pattern of Global Humanitarian Commitment,” *The Nation*, Mar. 21, 2020.

⁶ Recent graduates of Cuba’s Universidad de Ciencias Informáticas (UCI) report that the student body is recruited for the “Truth Project” (*Proyecto Verdad*) to work as blog trolls spreading Cuban propaganda and attacking pro-democracy blogs. (Maria C. Werlau, interviews 2019 and 2020. Also see Maria C. Werlau, *Cuba’s intervention in Venezuela: a strategic occupation with global implications*, *Free Society Project/Neo Club Press*, 2019, <https://www.amazon.com/dp/B07VXKXF6Y>.)

⁷ See *National Security Archive’s Cuba project* at <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/project/cuba-project>.

⁸ This was reported by *CiberCuba* from official sources inside the island, as confirmed directly with the journalist. (Carlos Cabrera Pérez, “Pandemia de coronavirus reanima venta de servicios médicos de Cuba,” *CiberCuba*, Mar. 30, 2020; Carlos Cabrera Pérez, “Gobierno cubano cobraría más de dos millones de dólares por evacuación del crucero MS Braemar,” *CiberCuba*, Mar. 16, 2020.

one of the richest countries on the planet, has relied on Cuban help to contain the coronavirus.”⁹ In contrast, no one gushed over Miami hospitality just a few days later when thirteen crew members in need of life-critical care and passengers with COVID-19 symptoms were evacuated to local hospitals from the *Costa Magic* and another cruise ship, *Costa Favolosa*.¹⁰ Likewise, after the cruise ship *Costa Magic*, with confirmed and suspected coronavirus-infected passengers, was not welcomed by Cuba after spending two days bordering the island similarly rejected by other countries, world media was mute. By then, a festering internal outrage had been taken seriously by the Cuban government and further cruise ships were deprived of Cuba’s “awesome” solidarity.

All the while, Cuba was in a frenzy trying to sell its health workers and an Interferon Alpha 2B that it produces. By the end of March (2020), it had managed to secure many agreements with governments willing to bend internal and international laws, as they force the Cuban workers to accept a pittance pay—a minor fraction of what the Cuban government is paid—to risk their lives and leave family and country behind at this time of crisis. (See detailed reports on this practice, considered “trafficking in persons” at CubaSalud.org.) Cuba’s huge diplomatic corps had been busy for months seeking to place the reported 10,000 doctors repatriated since late 2018 after medical missions were terminated in Brazil, Bolivia, Ecuador, Honduras, and El Salvador. As COVID-19 spread worldwide, Cuban officials began openly advertising the doctors as “available, ready, and willing to serve their duty inside or outside the fatherland.”¹¹

By mid-March, a growing number of Cuba’s health workers were flying to different countries in response to, according to Cuban officials, “requests for help.”¹² By March 29th, so-called emergency relief Henry Reeve brigades¹³ had been sent to fourteen countries, composed of, according to Cuba’s Minister of Health, 593 professionals of whom 179 were doctors, 399 nurses and 15 technologists.¹⁴ However, if the number of workers sent to each of the fourteen countries is counted as reported, it adds up to 1,310, and subtracting the 348 who were already in Haiti and just reassigned,¹⁵ comes to 962, or 369 more, some of whom might be the managers or “handlers.” (These discrepancies are typical of all statistics from Cuba.) The fourteen COVID-19 brigades announced by the end of March 2020 included: Andorra (38),¹⁶ Angola (256), Antigua & Barbuda

⁹ B. Norton, op. cit. The Grayzone describes itself as “an independent news website dedicated to original investigative journalism and analysis on politics and empire” “founded and is edited by award-winning journalist and author Max Blumenthal.” The author of the piece, Ben Norton, is assistant editor of the investigative journalism website *The Grayzone* and a contributor to the media watchdog Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting, FAIR (<https://bennorton.com/>).

¹⁰ “Cambia de rumbo y se aleja de Cuba el crucero Costa Mágica, con casos de COVID-19,” *Diario de Cuba*, Miami, Mar. 26, 2020.

¹¹ Nuria Barbosa León, “El país de las batas blancas anda de hermano,” *Granma*, Mar. 21 2020.

¹² On March 20th, for example, Cuba’s Ambassador in Peru, Sergio González, said that fifteen countries “had asked” for Cuba’s “professional support Luis Enrique Pérez, “Coronavirus: unos 150 médicos cubanos en Perú ofrecen apoyo para enfrentar avance de la pandemia,” *Convoca*, Mar. 20, 2020.

¹³ Cuba has for decades used disasters around to send its doctors as a rapid response team (to natural disasters and medical emergencies. In 2005, Fidel Castro offered assistance to the U.S. after the Katrina hurricane and named it after a New York city native who fought with the Cubans in the First War of Independence from Spain (1868-1878). (“Misión Henry Reeve,” Fidel, soldado de las ideas, <http://www.fidelcastro.cu/es/internacionalismo/mision-henry-reeve;> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Henry_Reeve_\(soldier\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Henry_Reeve_(soldier)).)

¹⁴ 338 were women.

¹⁵ A contingent of 348 was reported as part of the Henry Reeve Brigade to fight coronavirus in for Haiti but it appears that the 348 were already part of the medical brigade of 541 and were just reassigned to fight COVID-19 in a ceremony at the Cuban embassy in Port au Prince. (“El Gobierno de Haití agradece el apoyo médico de Cuba en la lucha contra COVID-19,” *Sputnik News*, Mar. 26, 2020; “Abanderado colectivo médico cubano que apoyará batalla contra el Coronavirus en Haití,” Mar. 25, 2020, <http://misiones.minrex.>)

¹⁶ Daniella Pérez Muñoa, “Brigada médica cubana hacia Andorra para hacer frente al nuevo coronavirus,” *Agencia Cubana de Noticias*, La Habana, Mar. 28, 2020.

(31),¹⁷ (Belize (58),¹⁸ Dominica (34),¹⁹ Haiti (348),²⁰ Jamaica (140),²¹ Italy (52),²² St. Vincent & Grenadines (16),²³ St. Lucia (111),²⁴ Nicaragua (5),²⁵ St. Kitts & Nevis (33),²⁶ Suriname (51),²⁷ and Venezuela (137).²⁸ On April 6th, another brigade of 101 nurses, was on its way to Barbados.²⁹ There was rare mention in the media coverage of the non-medical staff part of the brigade, and only the Andorra and Italy contingents were reported to have one person each for “logistics,”³⁰ which is the job description Cuba uses for the “handlers,” although the Italy brigade was reported to have one more member not a doctor or nurse whose role was not reported.³¹

It was clear that Cuba was engaged in an all-out campaign. Leftist politicians in Catalunya and Valencia have pushed their local governments to hire the health workers and purchase interferon from Cuba but this was reportedly rejected.³² In the Philippines, the progressive Makabayan Bloc in the House of Representatives urged their government to request and purchase the interferon from the Cuban government and “to turn to Cuba” to address the lacking manpower for the coronavirus emergency. They asked for the government to enter into an agreement with Cuba for the transfer of medical technology and training of Filipino health workers “on the most advanced techniques and practices” due to Cuba’s “exemplary healthcare system,” and effective and efficient handling of the COVID-19 pandemic.³³

Expectedly, Argentina’s Minister of Health confirmed his government was evaluating Cuba’s offer of 500 doctors³⁴ and Mexico’s President said he was discussing with Cuba its support in doctors and nurses specialized in intensive care.³⁵ Given the model established in the past with Venezuela and other ALBA countries,³⁶ large

¹⁷ “COVID-19 (Coronavirus) Response Update from the Ministry of Health,” Mar. 21, 2020, <https://antigua-barbuda.com/COVID-19-coronavirus-response-update-from-the-ministry-of-health>.

¹⁸ Manuel Asseff Blanco, Brigada médica cubana hacia Belice para luchar contra la COVID-19, *Agencia Cubana de Noticias*, Mar. 25, 2020.

¹⁹ “Dominica to receive medical help from Cuba to fight COVID-19,” *Dominica News Online*, Tuesday, Mar. 24, 2020.

²⁰ “El Gobierno de Haití agradece,” op. cit.; “Abanderado colectivo,” op. cit.

²¹ “Brigada médica cubana parte a Jamaica para combatir el COVID-19,” *Granma*, Mar. 21 2020.

²² “Arribará a Italia brigada médica cubana para ayudar a combatir el COVID-19,” *Granma*, Mar. 21, 2020; “Brigada médica cubana viaja a Italia para combatir Covid-19,” *Escambray/Agencia Prensa Latina*, Mar. 21, 2020.

²³ “St. Vincent and the Grenadines Prime Minister receives Cuban medical brigade,” Kingstown, *Radio Havana Cuba*, Mar. 27, 2020.

²⁴ “Cuban medical professionals arrival to fight COVID-19,” Press Release, Ministry of Health, Mar. 30, 2020, <https://www.stlucianewsonline.com/cuban-medical-professionals-arrival-to-fight-COVID-19/>.

²⁵ Yosel E. Martínez Castellanos, “Brigada Henry Reeve en Nicaragua: Brindaremos nuestra modesta experiencia,” *Granma*, Mar. 18, 2020.

²⁶ “Cuba envía médicos a 12 países para luchar contra coronavirus,” *HispanTV*, Mar. 29, 2020.

²⁷ “Brigada cubana apoyará combate a la COVID-19 en Surinam,” *Radio Havana Cuba*, Mar. 25, 2020.

²⁸ 137 primary doctors were sent to Venezuela, assigned to the most affected areas: the capital as well as Miranda and La Guaira states, to join the reported 21,000 “social mission” from Cuba already there. (Jorge Pérez Cruz, “Frente a la COVID-19 Venezuela fortalece la atención primaria de salud,” *Granma*, Mar. 25, 2020.)

²⁹ Susana Antón, “A Barbados, por primera vez, la salud en la solidaridad de Cuba, con más rostro de mujer,” *Granma*, Apr. 6, 2020; “Cuba to partner with Barbados in the fight against COVID-19,” *Loop*, Mar. 28, 2020.

³⁰ D. Pérez Muñoa, “Brigada médica cubana hacia Andorra,” op. cit. Beppe Severgnì, “Coronavirus, Carlos y médicos cubanos en Crema: “Nos quedaremos todo el tiempo que necesite,” *Solidaridad Cubana/Cuba Debate*, Mar. 29, 2020.

³¹ “Arribará a Italia,” op. cit. and “Brigada médica cubana,” op. cit.

³² Raúl Piña, “El Gobierno rechaza que Cuba ayude contra el coronavirus,” *El Mundo*, Apr. 3, 2020; “Valencia quiere contratar médicos cubanos para enfrentar coronavirus,” *ADN Cuba*, Mar. 30, 2020.

³³ Perwin Colcol, “Philippines urged to turn to Cuba for help vs. COVID-19,” *GMA News*, Mar. 25, 2020.

³⁴ “Coronavirus: Salud bonaerense evaluará la oferta de Cuba de enviar médicos,” *Página 12*, Mar. 26, 2020.

³⁵ “López Obrador platica con Cuba por apoyo médico para México,” *El Periódico*, Apr. 6, 2020.

³⁶ ALBA is the *Alianza Bolivariana para los Pueblos de Nuestra América*, ALBA, an integration treaty initially promoted by Cuba and Venezuela to “emancipate” from the U.S. and Canada and free-market liberalism and capitalism, a project of political, social, and economic collaboration and complementation of Latin American and Caribbean countries inspired by the Cuban revolution that seeks to propel “a new humanistic model privileging social issues over the model of economic subordination model” and economic independence and political coordination under “21st century socialism with Cuban-Venezuelan tutelage. ([www.ecured.cu/ALBA_\(Alianza_Bolivariana\)](http://www.ecured.cu/ALBA_(Alianza_Bolivariana))); Ministerio del Poder Popular para Relaciones

brigades of Cuban doctors can be expected for both countries, with relatively new governments allied with Cuba, and that these will stay after the COVID-19 crisis is over. Allies have typically taken in the medical brigades to support Cuba—as these are Cuba’s main source of revenues—and, in exchange, Cuba provides them a tool to help radicalize the political environment. This might explain why the first fifteen COVID-19 brigades were mostly of nurses; Cuba must have been saving the excess doctors for a longer-term plan with its allies and/or is hoping to send them to oil-producing countries that usually pay more.

Cuba is relying on its usual allies. For instance, the extreme left pro-independence for Catalonia Spanish party *Candidatura de Unidad Popular* (CUP), demanded that their local government request a medical team from Cuba to fight the coronavirus pandemic.³⁷ However, *CiberCuba* reported that, although Cuba had offered its specialized medical services to Spain and other European nations, the central governments—except Andorra’s—had (at least to date) opted for autonomous regions such as Lombardy (of northern Italy) and Valencia or Catalunya (of Spain) to enter into the healthcare contracts with Havana.³⁸ Presumably, central governments wanted to avoid conflict with the European Union’s high standards against trafficking in persons. In case anyone had forgotten, the U.S. State Department had tweeted: “#Cuba offers its international medical missions to those afflicted with #COVID-19 only to make up the money it lost when countries stopped participating in the abusive program.” The little international coverage of the U.S. government tweet focused on Cuba’s official rebuke and replicated in an *Agence France Press* piece titled “Cuba blasts US 'lies' over virus medical help.”³⁹

According to a confidential source inside the island, Cuba was securing payments of \$5,000 to \$6,000 a month for each “collaborator” willing to go to fight COVID-19. The “internationalist” health workers usually receive on average no more than 10 to 20%. Although the Cuban doctors are generally forbidden from talking to the media, the head of the brigade to Italy gave an interview to a solidarity group that addressed the issue of payment: “We have not discussed any pay. We are here to collaborate. The Italian government has guaranteed us lodging and meals. Our action in this region is purely of solidarity.”⁴⁰ It also appears that some of the arrangements included the sale of Cuba’s interferon. Cuba’s health collaboration agreements often include the sale of medicines and medical supplies; in some cases, some of that is paid by donor countries, such by France, Norway, and others for the Cuban medical brigade in Haiti.

The “internationalists” farewell ceremonies, imbued with revolutionary fervor, had the doctors waving Cuban flags with those of the host country and displaying photographs of Fidel Castro. Most were wearing their white coats and cloth face masks as part of the show. One of the doctors going to Venezuela declared “on behalf of her colleagues” that “Cuba’s medical collaboration is the result of the revolutionary formation based on the teachings of Martí and Fidel, one that delivers health to thousands of people worldwide regardless of distance, language, or danger.”⁴¹ There was no mention of how qualifications and credentials for the Cuban health workers to practice in the host country had been vetted or whether the Cuban workers shipping out had been tested to exclude carriers of the virus, which is said to live in a considerable percentage of asymptomatic hosts. This seemingly essential point apparently escaped all the eager hosts except in Andorra despite the Cuban government’s doubtful insistence of no community spread inside Cuba as well as its long history of silenced or

Exteriores, “Instalada XIV Cumbre del Alba-TCP en honor al Comandante Hugo Chávez,” Venezuelan Embassy in Syria, goo.gl/xxy52M; and XV Cumbre del Alba-TCP se realizará este lunes en Caracas, Vicepresidencia de Venezuela, Mar. 4, 2018, goo.gl/WhdwgZ. (Translated from Spanish.) ALBA countries are Cuba, Venezuela, Nicaragua, Surinam and a few island nations in the Caribbean; Bolivia and Ecuador left the ALBA.)

³⁷ “Partido de extrema izquierda español quiere médicos cubanos para tratar el coronavirus en Cataluña,” *CiberCuba*, Apr. 1, 2020.

³⁸ C. Cabrera Pérez, “Pandemia de coronavirus,” op. cit.; “En Cataluña también quieren médicos cubanos,” *OnCuba*, Apr. 1, 2020.

³⁹ “Cuba blasts US 'lies' over virus medical help,” *France 24/AFP*, Mar. 26, 2020.

⁴⁰ B. Severgni, op. cit.

⁴¹ Words of Dr. Magaly Queiro Fernández, member of the medical misión to Venezuela, translated from Spanish. (Jorge Pérez Cruz, “Frente a la COVID-19 Venezuela fortalece la atención primaria de salud,” *Granma*, Mar. 25, 2020.)

falsified public health information. Soon enough, on April 1st, Andorra reported that one of the 39 members of the Cuban brigade had tested positive for coronavirus despite having no symptoms.⁴² The woman doctor had traveled with her colleagues by air from Cuba to Madrid and by bus to Andorra had been at the hospital in Andorra —the entire brigade was ordered into quarantine.⁴³



Cuban doctors before leaving for Italy.
Photo: Oliver Zamora Oria/Cubadebate

Cuba's medical mission to Italy —reportedly comprised of 35 doctors (23 general doctors, 3 pneumologists, 3 intensive care doctors, 3 infectious disease specialists and 3 in emergency medicine) and 15 nurses plus a “manager for logistics” with Interferon Alpha 2B—⁴⁴ received huge media coverage in Italy as well as all over the world. The Health Minister of Lombardy (northern Italy), Giulio Gallera, held a press conference⁴⁵ to announce “Cuban solidarity with Italy” and local Communist, organized labor, and Cuba solidarity groups were hard at work making sure everyone heard. With Lombardy overwhelmed by a terrible health crisis and a growing toll in lives, the Cubans arrived in white coats to general applause at the Milan airport.⁴⁶ (Cuba's “army of white coats” must travel in white medical garb to increase visibility and effect.) *Granma*, the leading daily and official newspaper of the Cuban Communist Party, gave examples of the messages coming in from Italy: “The people and the media of Italy are all grateful to Cuba and its doctors for coming to help us. This is an example of the meaning of the word internationalism and of the Cubans’ big heart.”⁴⁷ The Italian Communist Party sent a letter to Raúl Castro, disseminated by Cuba's news agency *Prensa Latina*,⁴⁸ that read: “Your doctors have cured patients in 64 countries... Thanks to the teachings of Commander Fidel Castro, they are a testament of the value and superiority of the socialist society.”⁴⁹ Conversely, when U.S. President Donald Trump announced \$100 million in aid to Italy,⁵⁰ a google search in English and Spanish the following day came up with just a *Voice of America*

⁴² “Médico cubano da positivo al coronavirus en Andorra,” *CiberCuba*, Apr. 1, 2020.

⁴³ “En cuarentena la brigada médica cubana en Andorra por posible contagio de COVID-19,” *Diario de Cuba*, Washington, Apr. 3, 2020.

⁴⁴ Vinay, B.S., op. cit.

⁴⁵ B. Norton, op. cit.

⁴⁶ “The life that begins for Cuban doctors in Italy,” *OnCuba*, Mar. 24, 2020.

⁴⁷ Nuria Barbosa León, “Ciudadanos de Italia sobre médicos cubanos: «Mucha gente está cambiando su juicio sobre Cuba»,” *Granma*, Mar. 24, 2020.

⁴⁸ “Envía Partido Comunista de Italia mensaje de agradecimiento a Raúl Castro y Miguel Díaz Canel,” *Radio Rebelde*, Apr. 4, 2020.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Wilfredo Cancio, “Trump enviará suministros médicos a naciones de Europa golpeadas por el coronavirus; Ford producirá 50 mil ventiladores en 100 días,” *Ciber Cuba*, Mar. 31, 2020.

piece on U.S. aid in response to the crisis⁵¹ and two critical pieces titled “AMERICA NOT FIRST: Donald Trump boasts about sending \$100m coronavirus medical supplies to Italy despite shortages at U.S. hospitals” (in *The U.S. Sun*) and “As Governors Plead for Tests, Trump Promises Ventilators to Europe” (in *The New York Times*).⁵²

The health workers sent to Italy were assigned to a field hospital in Crema and arrived with no winter clothes; coats and the likes were being donated by the Italians.⁵³ As volunteer interpreters were being requested to help them, a curious double standard became evident. Around 200 Italian-speaking doctors from Venezuela, residents of Italy, had not been allowed to lend a hand. The president of a non-profit organization in northern Italy even offered the government of Lombardy a contingent of more than 200 Italian-Venezuelan health professionals (168 doctors including intensive care experts, anesthesiologists, and infectious disease specialists, plus 38 nurses and 18 biologists), residents of Italy “available almost immediately” to work in the emergency. For at least three years, she explained, several organizations had been fighting to have their Venezuelan university titles, particularly of the doctors, to be recognized in Italy.⁵⁴ The Cubans, whose qualifications and training have been questioned by medical associations of many countries and who don’t know the culture or the language, just had to fly in.

Most international media reports repeated Cuba’s narrative verbatim. *International Business Times* declared that “Cuban drug and doctors have been in demand globally” and “Cuba is helping the world healthcare,” claiming that “the Cuban drug 'recombinant human Interferon Alpha 2B' ... has effectively cured more than 1,500 patients in China from the coronavirus.”⁵⁵ *TeleSur TV* declared that Cuba’s interferon is “the most effective drug against coronavirus.”⁵⁶ *Morningstar* ran a story titled: “Cuban drug could save thousands of lives in coronavirus pandemic.”⁵⁷ Other headlines read: “Despite U.S. blockade, Cuban pharma industry producing needed COVID-19 medicines,”⁵⁸ and “Italy and UK rely on help from Cuba, China, Venezuela to fight coronavirus – as U.S. steps up brutal sanctions.”⁵⁹ An April 4, 2020 *Daily News* (of New York) piece by filmmaker Oliver Stone that covered all the talking points on Cuba (the humanitarianism, the cruise ship, the doctors, the U.S. bully),⁶⁰ claimed that the U.S. is increasing sanctions and “weaponizing” the virus against Cuba, Venezuela and Iran. Stone, winner of three Oscars, traveled to Cuba several times to meet with Fidel for his three documentaries *Comandante* (2003), *Looking for Fidel* (2005) and *Castro in Winter* (2012). When Fidel Castro died in 2016, Stone “recalled his admiration for the leader of the Cuban Revolution ... who he described as “a brilliant person” with “the ability to see everything very clearly.”⁶¹

⁵¹ Nike Ching, “US Pledges Additional Foreign Aid to Battle COVID-19, State Department,” *Voice of Americas*, Mar. 26, 2020.

⁵² Tariq Tahir, “The U.S. Sun, AMERICA NOT FIRST Donald Trump boasts about sending \$100m of coronavirus medical supplies to Italy despite shortages at US hospitals,” *The U.S. Sun*, Mar. 31 2020; “As Governors Plead for Tests, Trump Promises Ventilators to Europe,” *The New York Times*, Mar. 31, 2020. (*The New York Times* piece clarified that Trump was referring to the 10 American companies quickly increasing ventilator production and quotes him: “As we outpace what we need, we’re going to be sending them to Italy, we’re going to be sending them to France, we’re going to be sending them to Spain, where they have tremendous problems, and other countries as we can.”)

⁵³ B. Severgni, op. cit.

⁵⁴ Marinellys Tremamunno, “La verdadera historia de los médicos cubanos en Italia,” *Diario Las Américas*, Mar. 27, 2020.

⁵⁵ Vinay B.S., “This Cuban drug has been effective in fighting the Coronavirus pandemic,” Mar. 18, 2020, <https://www.ibtimes.sg/this-cuban-drug-has-been-effective-fighting-coronavirus-pandemic-41235>.

⁵⁶ “Cuba solidaria ante propagación del coronavirus en el mundo,” Mar. 20, 2020, *TeleSUR TV*.

⁵⁷ Steve Sweeney, “Cuban drug could save thousands of lives in coronavirus pandemic,” Mar. 15, 2020, *Morningstar Online*.

⁵⁸ Yaditza del Sol González, “Despite U.S. blockade, Cuban pharma industry producing needed COVID-19 medicines,” Mar. 17, 2020.

⁵⁹ B. Norton, op. cit.

⁶⁰ Daniel Kovalik and Oliver Stone, “Sanctions are terribly cruel during a pandemic,” *New York Daily News*, Apr. 4, 2020.

⁶¹ Michel Hernández, “Oliver Stone: We are going to miss Fidel,” *Granma*, Dec. 14, 2016.

The vast majority of the media coverage and online traffic failed to address the alarming situation inside Cuba, or mention the dark aspects of Cuba's medical diplomacy, or question the production (quality and safety) standards or effectiveness of Cuba's interferon. The typically-prying media failed to even wonder if or how Cuba's health workers were being compensated or why doctors from other countries were not as eager to leave behind their families, patients, and home countries also affected by the pandemic. One notable exception was *The Wall Street Journal's* Mary Anastasia O'Grady, who exposed the ruse and wrote: "...desperate times spawn crackpot measures, and the Cuban economy is skating dangerously close to the edge. The regime needs dollars to maintain the police state that has kept it in power for six decades."⁶²

Other significant efforts to assist during the pandemic seldom get much publicity and fans of Cuba's humanitarianism never bring them up. For instance, the response of Doctors Without Borders/Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) to the COVID-19 disease is extensive and reaches many countries.⁶³ MSF sends doctors, nurses, other experts and staff to work in conflict zones, after natural disasters, during epidemics, etc. Its accomplishments since its founding in 1971 are impressive; it has treated over a hundred million patients around the world and it operates with high standards of accountability and transparency.⁶⁴

Cuba's influence and propaganda apparatus⁶⁵

Promoting Cuba—its interests, goods and services, especially as a leader in health and biotechnology—is the work of a gigantic apparatus responsible for manufacturing perceptions.⁶⁶ This explains the regime's effective international projection and its influence, sympathy, and support despite its pervasive and systematic human rights' abuses and the evident failure of its Communist model and centrally-planned economy.

The totalitarian nature of the system allows the regime to allocate enormous resources—material and human—to work with consistent goals in exerting internal control and in furthering its objectives internationally. The regime operates free of bureaucratic-institutional rules and restraints that characterize even the weakest democracies. Unconstrained by judicial, ethical, and moral boundaries, it faces no separation/balance of powers or requirements for transparency and accountability. The Communist Party leadership has absolute power to strategize with great consistency as well as ample flexibility to use even the most unsavory tactics. It can act very quickly without the need for consultation and it can plan for the long term as well as wait patiently, as its power is enduring and faces no electoral challenges or term limits. Its directives are passed from the top down to be implemented by a huge number of orderlies in a large infrastructure of institutionalized apparatuses essentially designed to carry out orders.

Cuba's "formidable intelligence and counterintelligence force...is among the best in the world."⁶⁷ The intelligence service focuses on recruiting foreigners—many are easy prey due to political-ideological inclinations, can be easily exploited for psychological weaknesses and excessive ambition, or entrapped and blackmailed. Unconstrained by legal, ethical, or institutional restraints that the services of most other nations face, since 1959 Cuba's Directorate of Intelligence has planted agents/spies, "trusted sources," and collaborators/informants⁶⁸ all over the world—in academia, the media, business, pro-Cuba solidarity groups,

⁶² Mary Anastasia O'Grady, "Repression in the Time of Coronavirus," *The Wall Street Journal*, Mar. 22, 2020

⁶³ MSF was founded in 1971, employs more than 30,000 people and has offices in 21 countries. On its response to COVID-19, see <https://www.doctorswithoutborders.org/facts-and-figures-about-coronavirus-disease-outbreak-COVID-19#How%20is%20Doctors%20Without%20Borders%20responding%20to%20COVID-19?>

(Doctors without borders, <https://www.doctorswithoutborders.org/>)

⁶⁴ <https://www.doctorswithoutborders.org/who-we-are/accountability-reporting>.

⁶⁵ This section is based on the 2019 book by the author, M. Werlau, *Cuba's intervention in Venezuela*, op. cit.

⁶⁶ E. García, manuscript, op. cit.; M. Werlau, interviews with E. García, op. cit.

⁶⁷ William Tucker, "Cuban intelligence following reconciliation with the US," Department of Homeland Security, Jun. 16, 2015, goo.gl/DjFHwE.

⁶⁸ An agent accepts to collaborate with the intelligence service consciously, systematically, in a subordinated and clandestine way. A "trusted source" collaborates consciously, systematically, and mostly in a subordinated manner but

social movements, and in the most diverse sectors of society. The reach of its influence and penetration and propaganda after six decades is enormous.”⁶⁹

The intelligence services operate in sync with a massive apparatus for propaganda and disinformation. Fidel Castro considered propaganda the essence of the revolution⁷⁰ and from early on prioritized building a gigantic apparatus for synchronized propaganda,⁷¹ a tree whose trunk is the Ideology Department (“Departamento de Orientación Revolucionaria,” DOR), that falls under the Central Committee of the Cuban Communist Party. The latter has departments covering each country and geographic area and implements its “ideological penetration plans” through several agencies. The main international propaganda broadcaster is *Prensa Latina*, Cuba’s news agency. *Prensa Latina* is a large consortium that directs all efforts—print, TV, radio, multimedia—to spreading propaganda internationally in six languages: Spanish, English, Portuguese, Italian, Russian, and Turkish. As of June 2019, it had an estimated in-house full-time staff of 493 plus around 400 to 500 freelancers and collaborators all over the world operating from more than 400 offices. It has a publishing house for books and one for periodicals, a dedicated producer of audiovisual materials, a TV station, a radio station that broadcasts 26 daily programs, a web department with 17 sites in several languages, and its own department of photography.⁷²

Mass organizations in Cuba—labor, women, students, communist youth, artists, etc.—are all part of the state and have international relations’ departments to spread influence and propaganda. Just the Cuban Institute of Friendship with the Peoples (*Instituto Cubano de Amistad con los Pueblos*, ICAP) has hundreds of employees entirely directed to overseas’ relations, and is assisted by scores of community solidarity groups in many countries that it created and finances. In Africa and the Middle East alone, there are 95 associations in 45 countries for solidarity with Cuba whose main objective is to promote the regime’s interests and echo its narratives.⁷³ In the U.S., one organization alone, *Medical Education Cooperation with Cuba* (Medicc.org), founded in 1997, has a dedicated staff of eight to “promote US-Cuba health collaboration and highlight Cuba’s public health contributions to global health equity and universal health.”⁷⁴ Its impressive roster of over twenty institutional funders including *The Ford Foundation*, *The Rockefeller Foundation*, the *John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation*, the *General Service Foundation*, and the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO). Just one, *The Atlantic Philanthropies*, awarded *Medicc* a \$5.8 million grant in 2013⁷⁵ “to enhance cooperation among the U.S., Cuban and global health communities working towards better health outcomes and equity.”

Cuba’s diplomatic missions, ministries, and government agencies all serve as instruments of influence for the Communist Party and the intelligence services as well as deliver propaganda. Many of Cuba’s diplomats are intelligence agents under diplomatic cover; they serve in 120 countries and dozens of international institutions. At last count, the small and poor country of Cuba had the second highest per capita diplomatic delegation to the United Nations in New York (thirty-nine diplomats: ambassadors, attachés, and two or three secretaries for many of them)⁷⁶ and the tenth largest diplomatic delegation overall in addition to a large and active presence

not in a clandestinely (eg. typically, journalists and scholars due to their line of work). In M. Werlau, *Cuba’s intervention in Venezuela*, op. cit., p. 209.

⁶⁹ In the U.S., the Annual Threat Assessment of the U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency has long confirmed that Cuba is “a significant foreign intelligence threat. (Robert Ashley, Lt. General, US Army, “Statement for the record: worldwide threat assessment,” Director, Defense Intelligence Agency, Mar. 6, 2018, [goo.gl/bheQKA](https://www.dia.ic.gov/bheQKA).)

⁷⁰ “Una grave alerta de Guaicaipuro Lameda,” Mar. 11, 2016, [goo.gl/E9ZwTId](https://www.gob.cu/E9ZwTId); Carla Angola, “Los pobres tendrán que seguir siendo pobres, los necesitamos así,” Feb. 13, 2013, [goo.gl/5kaA2p](https://www.gob.cu/5kaA2p).

⁷¹ The U.S.’s CIA was well aware of its importance and scope by the early 1980s. See “Cuba: Castro propaganda apparatus and foreign policy,” Central Intelligence Agency, November 1984, approved for release July 2003 (from undetermined US government agency, declassified).

⁷² See M. Werlau, *Cuba’s intervention in Venezuela*, op. cit., p. 13.

⁷³ Nuria Barbosa León, “África y Cuba unidas por la amistad y la solidaridad,” *Granma*, Jun. 15 218.

⁷⁴ Who we are, <https://medicc.org/ns/about/>.

⁷⁵ “The Atlantic Philanthropies Award \$5.8 Million to Medical Education Cooperation with Cuba (MEDICC),” Oakland, California, Nov. 12, 2013.

⁷⁶ United Nations Protocol and Liaison Service protocol.un.org/dgacm/pls/site.nsf/eBlueBook.xsp.

in most U.N. bodies and other international agencies, where agents have been historically recruited at the highest levels.⁷⁷ The penetration (with agents of different nationalities as well as Cubans) in the Pan American Health Organization, based in Washington, and the World Health Organization in Geneva, has always been particularly important.⁷⁸

The Ministries of Tourism and of Trade and Foreign Investment are entirely directed overseas and all other government dependencies have officers assigned to each country; the Ministry of Health in particular is very dedicated to international affairs. Numerous state-owned corporations conduct international business and export wide-ranging professional services. Cuba has been particularly successful in projecting its soft power onto intellectual networks and the media. Its disproportionate influence in the two largest and most important associations dedicated to the study of Latin America is well known: LASA⁷⁹ (Latin American Studies Association) and CLACSO⁸⁰ (Latin American Council of Social Sciences).⁸¹ Finally, controlling the media has always been a priority; foreign journalists covering Cuba, especially correspondents working there, must self-censor to avoid losing their credentials and access⁸² and all international journalists must answer to minders at the International Press Center of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Cuba's trademark of influence-disinformation-propaganda has been so effective that it has triggered cognitive dissonance on a global scale.⁸³ The KGB defector Yuri Bezmenov explained that once a long-term ideological warfare process has been successful and an idea has taken hold, people do not believe information contradicting their indoctrination even when facts and evidence are presented.^{84/85}

COMING SOON

Part II: Coronavirus in Cuba: the perfect storm.

Part III: Interferon, Cuba's so-called "wonder drug" and the dark side of Cuba's biotechnology industry.

Part III: The real story of Cuba's medical diplomacy.

**Cuba Salud is a project of Cuba Archive in collaboration with
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⁷⁷ DGI defector Enrique García reports that Cuba had a paid agent from 1968 at least to his defection in 1989, the Bolivian Marcial Tamayo Sainz, a career U.N. diplomat. He was promoted to the high-ranking assignment of ambassador, served in numerous important posts, and was a close aide of the UN Secretary General and liaison with the White House. (Enrique García, book manuscript, and Maria C. Werlau, interviews with Enrique García 2015-2020.)

⁷⁸ Enrique García, unpublished manuscript and interviews of Mar. 2020 and many other instances. (García was a Captain of Cuba's General Directorate of Intelligence (DGI, now Directorate of Intelligence, DI) who defected to the U.S. from Ecuador in 1989, where he also had diplomatic status as the commercial representative of Cuba's Ministry of Commerce. He worked for the DI's Latin American division for eleven years and managed relations with seven countries. García shared his manuscript and has talked at length of his experiences on many other occasions with the author. They have been in a relationship for five years.)

⁷⁹ Latin American Studies Association, <https://www.lasaweb.org/en/>.

⁸⁰ Consejo Latinoamericano de Ciencias Sociales, <https://www.clacso.org.ar/>.

⁸¹ See Armando Chaguaceda and Maria Werlau, "The power of ideas: Cuba's efforts to shape debate in Latin America," *Power 3.0*, Apr. 25, 2019.

⁸² A number of foreign correspondents in Cuba have publicly spoken or written about this. For example, Vicente Botín, former correspondent for Spanish television Televisión Española in Cuba in 2005-2008, dedicated one chapter to this issue in his book on Cuba. See Vicente Botín, *Los funerales de Castro* (Madrid: Editorial Ariel, 2009).

⁸³ Cognitive dissonance refers to a situation involving conflicting attitudes, beliefs, or behaviors that produces a feeling of mental discomfort leading to an alteration in one of the attitudes, beliefs, or behaviors to reduce the discomfort and restore balance. (Saul McLeod, "Cognitive dissonance," updated 2018, <https://www.simplypsychology.org/cognitive-dissonance.html>.)

⁸⁴ Yuri Bezmenov, "Deception was my job." goo.gl/bVNMee.

⁸⁵ Paul Hollander has written extensively of the hero worship of despots. His book *From Benito Mussolini to Hugo Chávez: intellectuals and a century of political hero worship* (Cambridge University Press, 2016) has insightful impressions on the international left's (intellectuals and celebrities) relationship with Chávez, pp. 253-259.